

Finding the Courage to Overcome the Past

Introduction

Should you? Can you? Do you dare? Overcoming the past takes faith . . . and something more. Courage—that's what it takes to shed the problems and mistakes of the past and to dream again. When shame and darkness hide all glimpses of the future... when relinquishing the past means an uncertain tomorrow... when you're at the end of yourself and about to give up.. . you can find refuge in the shadow of Jesus. Listen as he gently whispers, "It's all right, my child. . . I will help you. I will never leave you." Together with him, you will find the courage to dream again.

Not Guilty

Overcoming Shame

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. But early in the morning he went back to the Temple, and all the people came to him, and he sat and taught them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery. They forced her to stand before the people. They said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught having sexual relations with a man who is not her husband. The law of Moses commands that we stone to death every woman who does this. What do you say we should do?" They were asking this to trick Jesus so that they could have some charge against him.

But Jesus bent over and started writing on the ground with his finger. When they continued to ask Jesus their question, he raised up and said. Anyone here who has never sinned can throw the first stone at her. "Then Jesus bent over again and Wrote on the ground.

Those who heard Jesus began to leave one by one, first the older men and then the others. Jesus was left there alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus raised up again and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one judged you guilty?"

She answered, "No one, sir."

Then Jesus said, "I also don't judge you guilty. You may go now, but don't sin anymore."

John 8:1–11

REBECCA THOMPSON fell twice from the Fremont Canyon Bridge. She died both times. The first fall broke her heart; the second broke her neck.

She was only eighteen years of age when she and her eleven-year-old sister were abducted by a pair of hoodlums near a store in Casper, Wyoming. They drove the girls forty miles southwest to the Fremont Canyon Bridge, a one-lane, steel-beamed structure rising 112 feet above the North Platte River.

The men brutally beat and raped Rebecca. She somehow convinced them not to do the same to her sister Amy. Both were thrown over the bridge into the narrow gorge. Amy died when she landed on a rock near the river, but Rebecca slammed into a ledge and was ricocheted into deeper water.

With a hip fractured in five places, she struggled to the shore. To protect her body from the cold, she wedged herself between two rocks and waited until the dawn.

But the dawn never came for Rebecca. Oh, the sun came up, and she was found. The physicians treated her wounds, and the courts imprisoned her attackers. Life continued, but the dawn never came.

The blackness of her night of horrors lingered. She was never able to climb out of the canyon. So in September 1992, nineteen years later, she returned to the bridge.

Against her boyfriend's pleadings, she drove seventy miles-per-hour to the North Platte River. With her two-year-old daughter and boyfriend at her side, she sat on the edge of the Fremont Canyon Bridge and wept. Through her tears she retold the story. The boyfriend didn't want the child to see her mother cry, so he carried the toddler to the car.

That's when he heard her body hit the water.

And that's when Rebecca Thompson died her second death. The sun never dawned on Rebecca's dark night. Why? What eclipsed the light from her world?

Fear? Perhaps. She had testified against the men, pointing them out in the courtroom. One of the murderers had taunted her by smirking and sliding his finger across his throat. On the day of her death, the two had been up for parole. Perhaps the fear of a second encounter was too great.

Was it anger? Anger at her rapists? Anger at the parole board? Anger at herself for the thousand falls in the thousand nightmares that followed? Or anger at God for a canyon that grew ever deeper and a night that grew ever blacker and a dawn that never came?

Was it guilt? Some think so. Despite Rebecca's attractive smile and appealing personality friends say that she struggled with the ugly fact that she had survived and her little sister had not.

Was it shame? Everyone she knew and thousands she didn't had heard the humiliating details of her tragedy. The stigma was tattooed deeper with the newspaper ink of every headline. She had been raped. She had been violated. She had been shamed. And try as she might to outlive and outrun the memory . . . she never could.

So nineteen years later she went back to the bridge.

Canyons of shame run deep. Gorges of never-ending guilt. Walls ribboned with the greens and grays of death. Unending echoes of screams. Put your hands over your ears. Splash water on your face. Stop looking over your shoulder. Try as you might to outrun yesterday's tragedies—their tentacles are longer than your hope. They draw you back to the bridge of sorrows to be shamed again and again and again.

If it was your fault, it would be different. If you were to blame, you could apologize. If the tumble into the canyon was your mistake, you could respond. But you weren't a volunteer. You were a victim.

Sometimes your shame is private. Pushed over the edge by an abusive spouse. Molested by a perverted parent. Seduced by a compromising superior. No one else knows. But you know. And that's enough.

Sometimes it's public. Branded by a divorce you didn't want. Contaminated by a disease you never expected. Marked by a handicap you didn't create. And whether it's actually in their eyes or just in your imagination, you have to deal with it—you are marked: a divorcee, an invalid, an orphan, an AIDS patient.

Whether private or public, shame is always painful. And unless you deal with it, it is permanent. Unless you get help—the dawn will never come.

You're not surprised when I say there are Rebecca Thompsons in every city and Fremont Bridges in every town. And there are many Rebecca Thompsons in the Bible. So many, in fact, that it almost seems that the pages of Scripture are stitched together with their stories. You've met many in this book. Each acquainted with the hard floor of the canyon of shame.

But there is one woman whose story embodies them all. A story of failure. A story of abuse. A story of shame. And a story of grace.

That's her, the woman standing in the center of the circle. Those men around her are religious leaders. Pharisees, they are called. Self-appointed custodians of conduct. And the other man, the one in the simple clothes, the one sitting on the ground, the one looking at the face of the woman, that's Jesus.

Jesus has been teaching.

The woman has been cheating.

And the Pharisees are out to stop them both.

"Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery" (John 8:4 NIV). The accusation rings off the courtyard walls.

"Caught in the act of adultery." The words alone are enough to make you blush. Doors slammed open. Covers jerked back.

"In the act." In the arms. In the moment. In the embrace.

"Caught." Aha! What have we here? This man is not your husband. Put on some clothes! We know what to do with women like you!

In an instant she is yanked from private passion to public spectacle. Heads poke out of windows as the posse pushes her through the streets. Dogs bark. Neighbors turn. The city sees. Clutching a thin robe around her shoulders, she hides her nakedness.

But nothing can hide her shame.

From this second on, she'll be known as an adulteress. 'When she goes to the market, women will whisper. When she passes, heads will turn.

When her name is mentioned, the people will remember.

Moral failure finds easy recall.

The greater travesty; however, goes unnoticed. What the woman did is shameful, but what the Pharisees did is despicable. According to the law, adultery was punishable by death, but only if two people witnessed the act. There had to be two eyewitnesses.

Question: How likely are two people to be eyewitnesses to adultery? What are the chances of two people stumbling upon an early morning flurry of forbidden embraces? Unlikely. But if you do, odds are it's not a coincidence.

So we wonder. How long did the men peer through the window before they barged in? How long did they lurk behind the curtain before they stepped out?

And what of the man? Adultery requires two participants. What happened to him? Could it be that he slipped out?

The evidence leaves little doubt. It was a trap. She's been caught. But she'll soon see that she is not the catch—she's only the bait.

“The law of Moses commands that we stone to death every woman who does this. What do you say we should do?” (v. 5).

Pretty cocky; this committee of high ethics. Pretty proud of themselves, these agents of righteousness. This will be a moment they long remember, the morning they foil and snag the mighty Nazarene.

As for the woman? Why, she’s immaterial. Merely a pawn in their game. Her future? It’s unimportant. Her reputation? Who cares if it’s ruined? She is a necessary; yet dispensable, part of their plan.

The woman stares at the ground. Her sweaty hair dangles. Her tears drip hot with hurt. Her lips are tight, her jaw is clenched. She knows she’s been framed. No need to look up. She’ll find no kindness. She looks at the stones in their hands. Squeezed so tightly that fingertips turn white.

She thinks of running. But where? She could claim mistreatment. But to whom? She could deny the act, but she was seen. She could beg for mercy, but these men offer none.

The woman has nowhere to turn.

You’d expect Jesus to stand and proclaim judgment on the hypocrites. He doesn’t. You’d hope that he would snatch the woman and the two would be beamed to Galilee. That’s not what happens either. You’d imagine that an angel would descend or heaven would speak or the earth would shake. No, none of that.

Once again, his move is subtle.

But, once again, his message is unmistakable.

What does Jesus do? (If you already know, pretend you don’t and feel the surprise.)

Jesus writes in the sand.

He stoops down and draws in the dirt. The same finger that engraved the commandments on Sinai’s peak and seared the warning on Belshazzar’s wall now scribbles in the courtyard floor. And as he writes, he speaks: “Anyone here who has never sinned can throw the first stone at her” (v. 7).

The young look to the old. The old look in their hearts. They are the first to drop their stones. And as they turn to leave, the young who were cocky with borrowed convictions do the same. The only sound is the thud of rocks and the shuffle of feet.

Jesus and the woman are left alone. With the jury gone, the courtroom becomes the judge’s chambers, and the woman awaits his verdict. *Surely, a sermon is brewing. No doubt, he’s going to demand that I apologize.* But the judge doesn’t speak. His head is down, perhaps he’s still writing in the sand. He seems surprised when he realizes that she is still there.

“Woman, where are they? Has no one judged you guilty?”

She answers, “No one, sir.”

Then Jesus says, “I also don’t judge you guilty. You may go now, but don’t sin anymore” (vv. 10–11).

If you have ever wondered how God reacts when you fail, frame these words and hang them on the wall. Read them. Ponder them. Drink from them. Stand below them and let them wash over your soul.

Or better still, take him with you to your canyon of shame. Invite Christ to journey with you back to the Fremont Bridge of your world. Let him stand beside you as you retell the events of the darkest nights of your soul.

And then listen. Listen carefully. He’s speaking.

“I don’t judge you guilty.”

And watch. Watch carefully. He’s writing. He’s leaving a message. Not in the sand, but on a cross.

Not with his hand, but with his blood.

His message has two words: Not guilty.

It's All Right to Dream Again

Facing Discouragement

At that time there was a strong earthquake. An angel of the Lord came down from heaven, went to the tomb, and rolled the stone away from the entrance. Then he sat on the stone. He was shining as bright as lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The soldiers guarding the tomb shook with fear because of the angel, and they became like dead men.

The angel said to the women, "Don't be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus, who has been crucified. He is not here. He has risen from the dead as he said he would. Come and see the place where his body was. And go quickly and tell his followers, Jesus has risen from the dead. He is going into Galilee ahead of you, and you will see him there." Then the angel said, "Now I have told you."

The women left the tomb quickly. They were afraid, but they were also very happy. They ran to tell Jesus' followers what had happened. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings." The women came up to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Don't be afraid. Go and tell my followers to go on to Galilee, and they will see me there."

Matthew 28:2–10

You know how you can read a story you think you know and then you read it again and see something you've never seen?

You know how you can read about the same event 100 times and then on the 101st hear something so striking and new that it makes you wonder if you slept through the other times?

Maybe it's because you started in the middle of the story instead of at the beginning. Or perhaps it's because someone else reads it aloud and pauses at a place where you normally wouldn't and POW! it hits you.

You grab the book and look at it, knowing that someone copied or read something wrong. But then you read it and well-how-do-you-do. Look at that!

Well, it happened to me. Today.

Only God knows how many times I've read the resurrection story. At least a couple of dozen Easters and a couple of hundred times in between. I've taught it. I've written about it. I've meditated on it. I've underlined it. But what I saw today I'd never seen before.

What did I see? Before I tell you, let me recount the story.

It's early dawn on Sunday morning and the sky is dark. Those, in fact, are John's words. "It was still dark . . ." (John 20:1).

It's a dark Sunday morning. It had been dark since Friday.

Dark with Peter's denial.

Dark with the disciples' betrayal.

Dark with Pilate's cowardice.

Dark with Christ's anguish.

Dark with Satan's glee.

The only ember of light is the small band of women standing at a distance from the cross— watching (Matt. 27:55).

Among them are two Marys, one the mother of James and Joseph and the other is Mary Magdalene. Why are they there? They are there to call his name. To be the final voices he hears before his death. To prepare his body for burial. They are there to clean the blood from his beard. To wipe the crimson from his legs. To close his eyes. To touch his face.

They are there. The last to leave Calvary and the first to arrive at the grave.

So early on that Sunday morning, they leave their pallets and walk out onto the tree-shadowed path. Theirs is a somber task. The morning promises only one encounter, an encounter with a corpse.

Remember, Mary and Mary don't know this is the first Easter. They are not hoping the tomb will be vacant. They aren't discussing what their response will be when they see Jesus. They have absolutely no idea that the grave

has been vacated.

There was a time when they dared to dream such dreams. Not now. It's too late for the incredible. The feet that walked on water had been pierced. The hands that healed lepers had been stilled. Noble aspirations had been spiked into Friday's cross. Mary and Mary have come to place warm oils on a cold body and bid farewell to the one man who gave reason to their hopes.

But it isn't hope that leads the women up the mountain to the tomb. It is duty. Naked devotion. They expect nothing in return. What could Jesus give? What could a dead man offer? The two women are not climbing the mountain to receive, they are going to the tomb to give. Period.

There is no motivation more noble.

There are times when we, too, are called to love, expecting nothing in return. Times when we are called to give money to people who will never say thanks, to forgive those who won't forgive us, to come early and stay late when no one else notices.

Service prompted by duty This is the call of discipleship.

Mary and Mary knew a task had to be done—Jesus' body had to be prepared for burial. Peter didn't offer to do it. Andrew didn't volunteer. The forgiven adulteress or healed lepers are nowhere to be seen. So the two Marys decide to do it.

I wonder if halfway to the tomb they had sat down and reconsidered. What if they'd looked at each other and shrugged, "What's the use?" What if they had given up? What if one had thrown up her arms in frustration and bemoaned, "I'm tired of being the only one who cares. Let Andrew do something for a change. Let Nathaniel show some leadership."

Whether or not they were tempted to, I'm glad they didn't quit. That would have been tragic. You see, we know something they didn't. We know the Father was watching. Mary and Mary thought they were alone. They weren't. They thought their journey was unnoticed. They were wrong. God knew. He was watching them walk up the mountain. He was measuring their steps. He was smiling at their hearts and thrilled at their devotion. And he had a surprise waiting for them.

At that time there was a strong earthquake. An angel of the Lord came down from heaven, went to the tomb, and rolled the stone away from the entrance. Then he sat on the stone. He was shining bright as lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The soldiers guarding the tomb shook with fear because of the angel, and they became like dead men.

Matthew 28:2—4

(Now, read carefully, this is what I noticed for the first time today.)

Why did the angel move the stone? For whom did he roll away the rock?

For Jesus? That's what I always thought. I just assumed that the angel moved the stone so Jesus could come out. But think about it. Did the stone have to be removed in order for Jesus to exit? Did God have to have help? Was the death conqueror so weak that he couldn't push away a rock? ("Hey, could somebody out there move this rock so I can get out?")

I don't think so. The text gives the impression that Jesus was already out when the stone was moved! Nowhere do the Gospels say that the angel moved the stone for Jesus. For whom, then, was the stone moved?

Listen to what the angel says: "Come and see the place where his body was" (v. 6).

The stone was moved—not for Jesus—but for the women; not so Jesus could come out, but so the women could see in!

Mary looks at Mary and Mary is grinning the same grin she had when the bread and fish kept coming out of the basket. The old passion flares. Suddenly it's all right to dream again.

"Go quickly and tell his followers, 'Jesus has risen from the dead. He is going into Galilee ahead of you, and you will see him there'" (v. 7).

Mary and Mary don't have to be told twice. They turn and start running to Jerusalem. The darkness is gone. The sun is up. The Son is out. But the Son isn't finished.

One surprise still awaits them.

"Suddenly, Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings.' The women came up to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Don't be afraid. Go and tell my followers to go on to Galilee, and they will see me there'" (vv. 9—10).

The God of surprises strikes again. It's as if he said, "I can't wait any longer. They came this far to see me; I'm going to drop in on them."

God does that for the faithful. Just when the womb gets too old for babies, Sarai gets pregnant. Just when the

failure is too great for grace, David is pardoned. And just when the road is too dark for Mary and Mary, the angel glows and the Savior shows and the two women will never be the same.

The lesson? Three words. Don't give up.

Is the trail dark? Don't sit.

Is the road long? Don't stop.

Is the night black? Don't quit.

God is watching. For all you know right at this moment he may be telling the angel to move the stone.

The check may be in the mail.

The apology may be in the making.

The job contract may be on the desk.

Don't quit. For if you do, you may miss the answer to your prayers.

God still sends angels. And God still moves stones.

Galilean Grace

When You Let God Down

Later, Jesus showed himself to his followers again—this time at Lake Galilee. This is how he showed himself: Some of the followers were together: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the two sons of Zebedee, and two other followers. Simon Peter said, “I am going out to fish.”

The others said, “We will go with you. “So they went out and got into the boat. They fished that night but caught nothing.

Early the next morning Jesus stood on the shore, but the followers did not know it was Jesus. Then he said to them, “Friends, did you catch any fish?”

They answered, “No.”

He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some. “So they did, and they caught so many fish they could not pull the net back into the boat.

The follower whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord.” When Peter heard him say this, he wrapped his coat around himself (Peter had taken his clothes off) Then he jumped into the water. The other followers went to shore in the boat, dragging the net full of fish. They were not very far from shore, only about a hundred yards. When the followers stepped out of the boat and onto the shore, they saw a fire of hot coals. There were fish on the fire, and there was bread.

Then Jesus said, “Bring some of the fish you just caught.”

Simon Peter went into the boat and pulled the net to the shore. It was full of big fish, one hundred fifty-three in all, but even though there were so many, the net did not tear.

John 21:1–11

THE sun was in the water before Peter noticed it—a wavy circle of gold on the surface of the sea. A fisherman is usually the first to spot the sun rising over the crest of the hills. It means his night of labor is finally over.

But not for this fisherman. Though the light reflected on the lake, the darkness lingered in Peter's heart. The wind chilled, but he didn't feel it. His friends slept soundly, but he didn't care. The nets at his feet were empty, the sea had been a miser, but Peter wasn't thinking about that.

His thoughts were far from the Sea of Galilee. His mind was in Jerusalem, reliving an anguished night. As the boat rocked, his memories raced:

the clanking of the Roman guard, the flash of a sword and the duck of a head, a touch for Malchus, a rebuke for Peter, soldiers leading Jesus away.

“What was I thinking?” Peter mumbled to himself as he stared at the bottom of the boat. *Why did I run?*

Peter had run; he had turned his back on his dearest friend and run. We don't know where. Peter may not have known where. He found a hole, a hut, an abandoned shed—he found a place to hide and he hid.

He had bragged, “Everyone else may stumble . . . but I will not” (Man. 26:33). Yet he did. Peter did what he swore he wouldn't do. He had tumbled face first into the pit of his own *fears*. And there he sat. All he could hear was his hollow promise. *Everyone else may stumble but I will not. Everyone else . . . I will not. I will not. I will not.* A war raged within the fisherman.

At that moment the instinct to survive collided with his allegiance to Christ, and for just a moment allegiance won. Peter stood and stepped out of hiding and followed the noise till he saw the torch-lit jury in the courtyard of Caiaphas.

He stopped near a fire and warmed his hands. The fire sparked with irony. The night had been cold. The fire was hot. But Peter was neither. He was lukewarm.

“Peter followed at a distance” Luke described (22:54 NIV).

He was loyal . . . from a distance. That night he went close enough to see, but not close enough to be seen. The problem was, Peter was seen. Other people near the fire recognized him. “You were with him,” they had challenged. “You were with the Nazarene.” Three times people said it, and each time Peter denied it. And each

time Jesus heard it.

Please understand that the main character in this drama of denial is not Peter, but Jesus. Jesus, who knows the hearts of all people, knew the denial of his friend. Three times the salt of Peter's betrayal stung the wounds of the Messiah.

How do I know Jesus knew? Because of what he did. "Then the Lord turned and looked straight at Peter" (Luke 22:6 1 NW). 'When the rooster crowed, Jesus turned. His eyes searched for Peter and they found him. At that moment there were no soldiers, no accusers, no priests. At that predawn moment in Jerusalem there were only two people—Jesus and Peter.

Peter would never forget that look. Though Jesus' face was already bloody and bruised, his eyes were firm and focused. They were a scalpel, laying bare Peter's heart. Though the look had lasted only a moment, it lasted forever.

And now, days later on the Sea of Galilee, the look still seared. It wasn't the resurrection that occupied his thoughts. It wasn't the empty tomb. It wasn't the defeat of death. It was the eyes of Jesus seeing his failure. Peter knew them well. He'd seen them before. In fact he'd seen them on this very lake.

This wasn't the first night that Peter had spent on the Sea of Galilee. After all, he was a fisherman. He, like the others, worked at night. He knew the fish would feed near the surface during the cool of the night and return to the deep during the day. No, this wasn't the first night Peter had spent on the Sea of Galilee. Nor was it the first night he had caught nothing.

There was that time years before . .

Most mornings Peter and his partners would sell their fish, repair their nets, and head home to rest with a bag of money and a feeling of satisfaction. This particular morning there was no money. There was no satisfaction. They had worked all through the night but had nothing to show for it except weary backs and worn nets.

And, what's worse, everyone knew it. Every morning the shore would become a market as the villagers came to buy their fish, but that day there were no fish.

Jesus was there that morning, teaching. As the people pressed there was little room for him to stand, so he asked Peter if his boat could be a platform. Peter agreed, maybe thinking the boat might as well be put to some good use.

Peter listens as Jesus teaches. It's good to hear something other than the slapping of waves. When Jesus finishes with the crowd, he turns to Peter. He has another request. He wants to go fishing. "Take the boat into deep water, and put your nets in the water to catch some fish" (Luke 5:4).

Peter groans. The last thing he wants to do is fish. The boat is clean. The nets are ready to dry. The sun is up and he is tired. It's time to go home. Besides, everyone is watching. They've already seen him come back empty-handed once. And, what's more, what does Jesus know about fishing?

So Peter speaks, "Master, we worked hard all night trying to catch fish" (v. 5).

Mark the weariness in the words.

"We worked hard." Scraping the hull. Carrying the nets. Pulling the oars. Throwing the nets high into the moonlit sky. Listening as they slap on the surface of the water.

~4ll *night*. "The sky had gone from burnt orange to midnight black to morning gold. The hours had passed as slowly as the fleets of clouds before the moon. The fishermen's conversation had stilled and their shoulders ached. 'While the village slept, the men worked.

All . . . night . . . long.

"Trying to catch fish." The night's events had been rhythmic: net swung and tossed high till it spread itself against the sky. Then wait. Let it sink. Pull it in. Do it again. Throw. Pull. Throw. Pull. Throw. Pull. Every toss had been a prayer. But every drag of the empty net had come back unanswered. Even the net sighed as the men pulled it out and prepared to throw it again.

For twelve hours they'd fished. And now . . . now Jesus is wanting to fish some more? And not just off the shore, but in the deep?

Peter sees his friends shrug their shoulders. He looks at the people on the beach watching him. He doesn't know what to do. Jesus may know a lot about a lot, but Peter knows about fishing. Peter knows when to work and when to quit. He knows there is a time to go on and a time to get out.

Common sense said it was time to get out. Logic said cut your losses and go home. Experience said pack it up and get some rest. But Jesus said, *"We can try again if you want."*

The most difficult journey is back to the place where you failed.

Jesus knows that. That's why he volunteers to go along. "The first outing was solo; this time I'll be with you. Try it again, this time with me on board."

And Peter reluctantly agrees to try again. "But you say to put the nets in the water, so I will" (Luke 5:5). It didn't make any sense, but he'd been around this Nazarene enough to know that his presence made a difference. That wedding in Cana? That sick child of the royal ruler? It's as if Jesus carried his own deck to the table.

So the oars dip again and the boat goes out. The anchor is set and the nets fly once more.

Peter watches as the net sinks, and he waits. He waits until the net spreads as far as his rope allows. The fishermen are quiet. Peter is quiet. Jesus is quiet. Suddenly the rope yanks. The net, heavy with fish, almost pulls Peter overboard.

"John, James!" he yells. "Come quick!"

Soon the boats are so full of fish that the port side rim dips close to the surface. Peter, ankle deep in flopping silver, turns to look at Jesus, only to find that Jesus is looking at him.

That's when he realizes who Jesus is.

What an odd place to meet God—on a fishing boat on a small sea in a remote country! But such is the practice of the God who comes into our world. Such is the encounter experienced by those who are willing to try again . . . with him.

Peter's life was never again the same after that catch.

He had turned his back on the sea to follow the Messiah. He had left the boats thinking he'd never return. But now he's back. Full circle. Same sea. Same boat. Maybe even the same spot.

But this isn't the same Peter. Three years of living with the Messiah have changed him. He's seen too much. Too many walking crippled, vacated graves, too many hours hearing his words. He's not the same Peter. It's the same Galilee, but a different fisherman.

Why did he return? What brought him back to Galilee after the crucifixion? Despair? Some think so—I don't. Hope dies hard for a man who has known Jesus. I think that's what Peter has. That's what brought him back. Hope. A bizarre hope that on the sea where he knew him first, he would know him again.

So Peter is in the boat, on the lake. Once again he's fished all night. Once again the sea has surrendered nothing.

His thoughts are interrupted by a shout from the shore. "Catch any fish?" Peter and John look up. Probably a villager. "No!" they yell. "Try the other side!" the voice yells back. John looks at Peter. "What harm? So out sails the net. Peter wraps the rope around his wrist to wait.

But there is no wait. The rope pulls taut and the net catches. Peter sets his weight against the side of the boat and begins to bring in the net; reaching down, pulling up, reaching down, pulling up. He's so intense with the task, he misses the message.

John doesn't. The moment is déjà vu. This has happened before. The long night. The empty net. The call to cast again. Fish flapping on the floor of the boat. Wait a minute. He lifts his eyes to the man on the shore. "It's him," he whispers.

Then louder, "It's Jesus."

Then shouting, "It's the Lord, Peter. It's the Lord!"

Peter turns and looks. Jesus has come. Not just Jesus the teacher, but Jesus the death-defeater, Jesus the king . . . Jesus the victor over darkness. Jesus the God of heaven and earth is on the shore . . . and he's building a fire.

Peter plunges into the water, swims to the shore, and stumbles out wet and shivering and stands in front of the friend he betrayed. Jesus has prepared a bed of coals. Both are aware of the last time Peter had stood near a fire. Peter had failed God, but God had come to him.

For one of the few times in his life, Peter is silent. What words would suffice? The moment is too holy for words. God is offering breakfast to the friend who betrayed him. And Peter is once again finding grace at Galilee.

What do you say at a moment like this?

What do *you* say at a moment such as this?

It's just you and God. You and God both know what you did. And neither one of you is proud of it. What do you do?

You might consider doing what Peter did. Stand in God's presence. Stand in his sight. Stand still and wait. Sometimes that's all a soul can do. Too repentant to speak, but too hopeful to leave—we just stand.

Stand amazed.

He has come back.

He invites you to try again. This time, with him.

Study Guide

CHAPTER ONE NOT GUILTY

Looking Under the Stones

1. In what way did Rebecca Thompson “die” twice? Do you know of anyone who has “died” as Rebecca did the first time? If so, describe the situation.
2. No one can know for sure why Rebecca jumped. What do you think drove her to suicide? Fear? Anger? Guilt? Shame? Explain your answer.
3. Max writes, “Whether private or public, shame is always painful. And unless you deal with it, it is permanent. Unless you get help—the dawn will never come.” What do you think he means? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
4. What does the word *shame* mean to you? What does the word *grace* mean to you? Which is the stronger term? Why?
5. With what character in the story of John 8 do you identify most closely? The woman? The guilty (but absent) man? The Pharisees? The men in the crowd? Jesus? Explain your choice.
6. The Scripture doesn’t say, but what do you think Jesus may have been writing in the sand?
7. Jesus told the woman, “I also don’t judge you guilty. You may go now, but don’t sin anymore” (John 8:11). Does any part of this statement bother you? Is it what you would have expected Jesus to say? Why?
8. Do the words “not guilty” apply to you? Explain your answer. How do those words make you feel?

Building on the Rock

1. Read John 8:1–11.
 - a. What was the trap the Pharisees were trying to lay for Jesus? What did they want him to do? How did he avoid their trap?
 - b. Verse 9 says “those who heard Jesus’ answer began to go away one at a time, the older ones first.” Why do you think the older ones left first? Why is this an important detail?
2. Read Romans 8:1–9.
 - a. In what way does this text explain the phrase “not guilty”? According to Romans 8, to whom does it apply?
 - b. How does verse 9 explain how the woman caught in adultery could comply with Jesus’ command to her in John 8:11?

CHAPTER TWO IT’S ALL RIGHT TO DREAM AGAIN

Looking Under the Stones

- Max writes, “there are times when we, too, are called to love, expecting nothing in return.” What sort of times like this can you recall?
2. Discuss the following statement: “Service prompted by duty. This is the call of discipleship.”
 3. Does the fact that the angel rolled the stone away from the Lord’s tomb imply anything significant for your own life? If so, what?
 4. Describe some times in your life when God has proven to be a God of surprises.
 5. What challenges face you right now in which the words “don’t give up” are especially appropriate?
 6. How does it make you feel that God is watching you and your circumstances?
 7. In what ways does the resurrection breathe new life into your own hopes and dreams?

Building on the Rock

1. Read Matthew 28: 1–15.
 - a. Why do you think the angel not only rolled away the stone but then sat on it (v. 2)? Why do you think he spoke to the women and not to the guards?

- b. Why would the women be “afraid but they were also very happy” as verse 8 tells us? What logical flaws can you spot in the fabricated story described in verse 13?
2. Read Galatians 6:9.
 - a. What command is given in this verse? Why does it seem so easy for us to ignore this command? What promise is given to us when we comply with the command?
 - b. How are the two Marys good illustrations of the truth of this verse?
3. Read Hebrews 10:32–38.
 - a. What is the purpose of the “history lesson” in verses 32–34? If the writer were describing your own experience rather than that of the Hebrews, what would he have written?
 - b. What command is given in verse 35? What related promise is described? How is this promise further explained in verse 36?
 - c. How is the prophecy of verse 37 intended to help us persevere? In what way does this prophecy encourage you?

CHAPTER THREE GALILEAN GRACE

Looking Under the Stones

1. Why do you think Peter denied the Lord after Jesus was arrested? Have you ever “denied” him in a similar way? If so, describe the situation.
2. How was Peter’s denial an illustration of Proverbs 16:18? How is his experience a lesson and a warning for us?
3. Have you ever been loyal to the Lord . . . from a distance? If so, what were the circumstances surrounding this event?
4. When Luke 22:61 says that Jesus “turned and looked straight at Peter,” what sort of look do you think it was? Accusing? Condemning? Compassionate? Exasperated? Sorrowful? Explain your answer.
5. How do you think Peter felt at the moment he plunged into the lake to meet the Lord on the beach? What was going through his mind?
6. Max imagines a moment after we have sinned and writes, “It’s just you and God. You and God both know what you did. And neither one of you is proud of it. What do you do?” How would you answer his question?
7. Comment on the following statement: “[God] invites you to try again. This time, with him.” Exactly *how* do you try something again, this time with God? What do you do differently than you tried the first time around?

Building on the Rock

1. Read John 21:14–19.
 - a. The restoration of Peter was not complete until he went through the encounter described in this passage. What was Jesus trying to accomplish in this meeting? How did he do it?
 - b. Notice Jesus’ final charge to Peter in verse 19. How is this both different and the same as his original call recorded in Matthew 4:19? How is this significant?



Finding the Courage to Overcome Your Past

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